

# Dialectics of Human Relationships as Represented in Kiran Nagarkar's Cuckold and God's Little Soldier

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**Abstract:** It is said that the novel form that flourished in Europe with the emergence of the middle class after the industrial revolution, was the most suitable form to capture the growing familial and societal anxieties of the newly established class order. As a blessing in disguise, the colonial world in India was also exposed to this new form. Right from the inception of the novel form, the Indian novelists have grappled with the idea of representing the changing dynamics of the family institution with the advent of societal changes. Kiran Nagarkar (1942—2019) is one such significant Indian English novelist writing in the phase of post-colonialism. Clash of social—personal worlds amidst the rampant decadent world has remained Nagarkar's prime concern. In the present research paper, the researcher would like to discuss the representation of family institution in Kiran Nagarkar's two novels namely, *Cuckold* (1997) and *God's Little Soldier* (2006).

**Keywords:** Saint Meera, medieval India, metropolitan world, globalization, family disintegration

In any age and any society, Love, War, and Death have been considered universal themes. To delineate these themes a writer of any literary form relies either on the familial world or a societal world or sometimes on both. It is said that the novel form that flourished in Europe with the emergence of the middle class after the industrial revolution, was the most suitable form to capture the growing familial and societal anxieties of the newly established class order. As a blessing in disguise, the colonial world in India was also exposed to this new form. It was but natural that the Indian mind found this new form more apposite as the family institution has remained the central metaphor in Indian literature since the epic times. Right from the inception of the novel form, the Indian novelists have grappled with the idea of representing the changing dynamics of the family institution with the advent of societal changes.

Kiran Nagarkar (1942—2019) is one such significant Indian English novelist writing in the phase of post-colonialism. Clash of social—personal worlds amidst

the rampant decadent world has remained Nagarkar's prime concern. *Seven Sixes Are Forty-three* (1978), *Ravan and Eddie* (1995), *Cuckold* (1997), and *God's Little Soldier* (2006) are considered as his significant novels. In the present research paper, the researcher would like to discuss the representation of family institutions in Nagarkar's two novels namely, *Cuckold* and *God's Little Soldier*. The canvas of these novels is indeed situated in an altogether different space and time. In Nagarkar's fiction, the individual aspirations of the protagonists are governed by their personal and familial worlds and that creates the complexities of human existence. In the present paper, the researcher intends to explore the dynamics of such a struggle at personal and familial levels.

Nagarkar's earlier novels namely *Seven Sixes* and *Ravan and Eddie* deal with the metropolitan ethos. Surprisingly in the case of *Cuckold* Nagarkar shifts his focus to the feudal society of medieval times. The slice of history that has been selected by Nagarkar belongs to the 16th century Mewar. He remains very much faithful to all the minute details related to the 16th century Mewar, with all its intricacies, diplomacies, feuds, and wars, except the Maharaj Kumar, the center stage of the fictional world of *Cuckold*. As Nagarkar says, "Meerabai's name is on almost every Indian lips" (609), but the irony is that her husband, Bhoj Raj, the Maharaj Kumar, the eldest son of Rana Sanga and the would-be king of Mewar has been disappeared from the pages of history. There are very scanty references to Bhoj Raj. Nagarkar utilizes this space more extensively by fictionalizing the character of Bhoj Raj and through him looks at the history of Mewar. In the novel, he appears as the Maharaj Kumar which is not a name of the character but a title conferred on him. The novel very distinctively reveals the two domains: the social domain and Maharaj Kumar's domain.

The Maharaj Kumar as seen in the novel is the strong contestant to the throne of Mewar. As an administrator, as a diplomat, and as a ruler he is ahead of his times. But his aspirations have been marred by his familial relations. Like any medieval age feudal family, the Maharaj Kumar is confronted with tensions and anxieties at different levels like son — father relationship or stepbrother, stepmother relationships. Though an elder son,

the Maharana, the father of the Maharaj Kumar never opens his cards about the successor to the throne. He intently allows Maharaj Kumar and Vikramaditya, his stepbrother to jostle with each other. The Maharaj Kumar has a vision of the Mewar state. Instead of any architectural monuments, Maharaj Kumar is interested in the town planning and the welfare of his populace. In the case of warfare strategies to he is very keen. In the battles against Gujarat and Malwa, as seen in the novel, Maharaj Kumar exploits the unorthodox war strategies and wins decisively. However, on the home front, he receives an unceremonious welcome being fought not in the true Rajput style. But as the narrative proceeds, it becomes clear that Maharaj Kumar's road to the throne has been obstructed by his stepbrother and stepmother. Despite being a competent prince and would-be king it is seen that the familial relationships prevent the Maharaj Kumar from attaining his goals. The Maharaj Kumar is wise enough to comprehend the moves and countermoves in the familial domain. But the real pain in the neck for him is his wife, the Greeneyes. The references to the Greeneyes explicitly convey that she is none other than Meera, the legendary saint-poet of medieval India. Despite this fact, she has never been referred to with this name throughout the novel. The image of the Maharaj Kumar as has been presented as a prince, a diplomat, and a warrior counterbalances his image as a husband. On the first night of the wedding, the Greeneyes announces, "I'm spoken for...I'm betrothed to someone else" (46), which hurts the Maharaj Kumar, the embodiment of the male ego. The very first reaction of the Maharaj Kumar after realizing that he has been cuckolded, is his doubt and suspicion about the third one, who must be 'he'? The thought torments him. He insults the Greeneyes to know his name. The Maharaj Kumar reads the Greeneyes' letters and comes across the open confession of her love through the lyrics. The Maharaj Kumar becomes frenzied and wants to kill the third one. He is now obsessed to know the identity of the Greeneyes' beloved. He interrogates her consistently: "Is it my younger brother, Ratan? Or my debonair paternal cousin, Rajendra? Or is it Vikramaditya.... Or is it the uncle of yours, the one you went back with to Merta, Rao Viramdeo..." (89-90). Unable to bear the humiliations, the Greeneyes, finally, points her finger in the direction of the idol of Shri Krishna. The Maharaj Kumar considers it as an old trick of deceiving him. He once again scans the poems she has written and comes to know that she calls her lover with different names like Shyam or Giridhar. He suspects that all these different names could be "a pseudonym, a pet name or a private code name for a beloved" (102). Thus, he cannot believe what she is saying. It only drifts afar the husband-wife relationship.

Gradually, the Greeneyes' worship of Krishna becomes a 'public affair'. In the eyes. of Vikramaditya, Karmavati, and the other noble people, she emerges as a 'national scandal' and the Maharaj Kumar remains a weak and unassertive husband'. Unable to bear this identity, at

one instance, when she is singing and praying her lord publicly, he considers her a 'tawaif and breaks down her 'ektara' in an agony.

Thus caught in familial trauma at every phase of his life, the Maharaj Kumar emerges as a defeated individual. Denial on the social level as a successful warrior and diplomat, and denial on the personal level as a husband enfold the most torturing persona of Maharaj Kumar. In the novel, it is seen that, at every juncture, the Maharaj Kumar as an individual struggles hard to overcome familial burdens. Though at the end of the novel it is seen that the Maharaj Kumar emerges as the frustrated and defeated individual because of the terrible loss at the hands of Babur, his mysterious disappearance provides one more dimension to interpret the Maharaj Kumar's journey (As the narrator tells, the Maharaj Kumar is dissolved in the idol of Lord Krishna where he addresses God,

How long will you nurse this enmity? How long will you fight this personal war? And to what purpose? Do you not know that you and I are one? My flute and song are on your lips. We love the same woman: Why, you fool, no power on earth can separate or divide us. (602)

Thus the crisis between the Maharaj Kumar and Greeneyes begins on a very humanly level, by the end of the novel it reaches the metaphysical level. In the novel, the relationship of Maharaj Kumar and Greeneyes exemplifies the typical man-woman relationship that undergoes the sense of doubt, suspicion, and vengeance. Even being the kingly figure the character of Maharaj Kumar exhibits his urge for a familial life and disturbance at this level brings frustration in his mind that results in his failure to overcome the tensions at social, personal, and of course at a political level. Though encompassing a large canvas in its narrative and depicting the various ties that bind human life, Nagarkar still reveals the intricacies of human relationships and man's archetypal need to relate himself to a soul and not simply to the concrete world around. God's Little Soldier is Nagarkar's fourth novel where the metropolitan world is its central locale. Here, Nagarkar extends the canvass of the novel on a much wider scale. It has the strong resonances of the throbbing present times particularly the global order after the 9/11 attack on the WTC. Zia Khan is the protagonist of this novel. The narrative unfolds Zia Khan's two avatars about two different religious ideologies namely Islam and Christianity. In both these avatars, Zia is seen as an extremist. The novel powerfully projects the saddening tragedy of an individual who is obsessed with a sense of extremism. Nagarkar makes Zia Khan's tragedy more pathetic by placing him in familial relationships which are no cozier and have been cursed by too much individualism.

The novel encompasses the late-capitalist social scenario in the global context. Commercialization, trade, and

commerce are the watchwords of this world. The living style, the living faith everything has been controlled by the capitalist market that has driven the human world towards disintegration in every sense of the term. This post-globalization scenario is very significantly depicted in God's Little Soldier. The disintegrating family institution and the decadent familial relationships are the major concerns in the Nagarkar fiction. But in Nagarkar's earlier novels, it appears that despite the shattering familial world, the characters strive to maintain the relationships and the family institution. But coming to God's Little Soldier, a major shift in Nagarkar's perception can be seen. The disintegrating family is seen on the verge of collapse and the tragedy of the situation is that no one is trying to stop it from further disintegration, and no one feels sorry for the loss. This familial crisis is enfolded in the novel through the family of Zia Khan in particular.

Zafar Khan and Shagufta, — Zia's parents are moderate and liberal in comparison with Zubeida Khaala, the sister of Shagufta, who lives with the Khan family. By profession, Zafar Khan is an architect and runs the family business of contracting and construction. Due to its sound financial position, the Khan family enjoys affluent ways of living. But one silly mistake in the construction of a fly-over ruins the career of Zafar Khan. The Khan family becomes nowhere overnight. From the luxurious Firdaus mansion, the family shifts to a tiny flat in the Sulieman mansion, located in the heart of Bhandi Bazar, Mumbai. Shagufta cannot cope with the altered circumstances. Consequently, the distance in Zafar—Shagufta relationship widens. Shagufta craves for the Firdaus days. Therefore frustrated Shagufta leaves Zafar and her family and prefers to live with her friend Nicholas Barrett, the head of First Federal Bank of America, who lives in a five-bedroom penthouse on Malbar Hill. She lives there nearly for six years and then once again returns to Zafar Khan. Back home, everyone welcomes Shagufta, except her son Zia. Zia never forgives her. While studying in Cambridge, he writes a letter to her expressing his resentment: "This is the last time I'll be calling you Ammijaan or writing to you. You are no longer my mother, nor is there any relationship possible between us..." (153). He considers her as the cause of the grief for the Khan family. While referring to the Shagufta — Nicholas relationship, in a bitter tone, Zia declares her 'a whore' and 'a promiscuous woman' and tells her, "If we lived in a Pak Islamic state, you know very well what your fate would have been: you would have been stoned to death in public" (153). Zia's letter disheartens Shagufta. Amanat, Zia's brother, conveys to him the pathetic condition of their mother: "Brave soul that she is she tries to be cheerful but sometimes when she is not on her guard the hurt shows. Then Ammi sits silently for her her hours..." (158). After the unsuccessful attempt of the killing of Salman Rushdie, when Zia returns home, the high-drama between the mother and the son reaches to a climax. Zia accuses her with the same charges. Realizing the rage and hatred in Zia's heart for her, Shagufta leaves

the house, keeping behind a brief note about her departure. And this time, she leaves the house never to return. Zia accuses his father also. He calls him 'a self-destructive man'. He holds Zafar responsible for Shagufta's way of living. In the same letter written to Shagufta, Zia writes that he still holds his father responsible for being a weak man who turned a blind eye to his wife's fallen ways. At the Suleiman mansion, when Zia assaults Shagufta, Zafar Khan does not make any attempt to stop Zia, nor does he repent when Shagufta leaves the house. Zafar Khan neither detests Zia nor hates Shagufta. He accepts the end of his career as an architect in a very detached way. In the same manner, he admits the marital break-up. In this way, there is no urge to save the marital life and through that the family ties in the case of Shagufta and Zafar.

Like Zafar — Shagufta there is a breach depicted in the relationship of Zubeida and her husband. Zubeida Khaala had been married to an IAS officer. But it proved to be a brief and unhappy affair. For her, it was a 'dreary and loveless' life. Besides that, in her teens, she had madly fallen in love with the film actor Dilip Kumar. After the breakup with her husband, Zubeida devotes her whole life to worshiping her idol. Towards the end of the novel, she is seen standing outside the bungalow of Dilip Kumar, waiting for him, the bungalow that he had left years ago, about which she is unaware. Amanat Khan, Zia's brother, carries the legacy of his father. His careers as a creative writer and as an architect are a failure. He marries Sagari, his childhood friend. Sagari has started her career quite early as a child artist which brings her wealth and fame. But as she grows up, the fame diminishes. For survival, she works as a part-time lecturer. She works hard to come back to the film industry. With her re-entry into the film industry, Amanat — Sagari's financial problems are solved to some extent. But during all these critical moments, the marital relationship is distorted. As Sagari becomes busier with her films, Amanat becomes lonelier. As the distance widens between them, Amanat prefers to live with Zubeida Khaala at the Suleiman mansion and Sagari is left alone in her new flat. Amanat compensates for the problem of communication by writing letters to Zia. Amanat's letters lay bare his heart and reveal how lonely and dejected he is in life. The childless couple goes on living the life that has lost the objectives to live it meaningfully.

In this way nothing is there in the Zafar family to bind them together, everyone is lonely and everyone has lost the sense of belonging. Despite that, no one repents on their losses. It is Amanat who perceives somewhat this loss and so appeals to Zia through a letter that comes at the end of the novel: Come home, Zia... Let's put up our feet and talk about old times. About Abbajaan, Zubeida Khaala, and Aunt Antonia. And yes, of dear Ammijaan too. (554)

The father-daughter relationship exposed through Dr. Patwardhan and Sagari also reveals the same fate that

has been seen through the crisis in the Khan family. By profession, Sagari's father is a physician. But as Sagari becomes a successful child artist, Dr. Patwardhan's way of living changes altogether. He ignores his practice as a physician. The film magazines project Sagari as "a born actress" and "a scene-stealer". But as she grows old, all of a sudden the film offers begin to dry up. Dr Patwardhan doesn't lose his hope. He keeps on entertaining directors, producers, and film journalists hoping Sagari's comeback and the return of their happy days. Sagari is very much disappointed with her father's behavior. As she turns eighteen, Sagari walks out of her father's house and starts living independently. She stops her communication with the father. But Dr. Patwardhan doesn't give up. He keeps sending producers and directors to meet Sagari to sign a film or an advertisement. Knowing those second-rate producers and directors, Sagari refuses the offers. Thus, the father and the daughter live in different worlds. The penniless Dr. Patwardhan becomes an addict to alcohol and dies in a hospital in a pathetic state. Sagari has very bitter feelings for her father. At one place in the novel, she tells Amanat, "Sometimes I think my father would like to be my pimp" (283). Even then, Sagari feels, at least someone is there with whom she can relate. That's why when Dr Patwardhan dies, Sagari clings to Amanat and says, "Now I have no one but you" (283).

By depicting the relationships between these different couples Nagarkar highlights the theme of familial disintegration at its global level. Antonia — Vivian's relationship reveals the same kind of drifting between the mother-daughter relationships. Antonia, a friend of Zafar and Zia's guardian at Cambridge is a professor. After the death of her husband, she devotes herself to the Church. Vivian perceives the distance between the relationships, which widens with the arrival of Zia in the family. Antonia's affection for Zia makes Vivian very much jealous of him. Initially, by criticizing Zia and his Islamic way of living, she distances herself from him. In course of time, this hatred for Zia turns into love. It becomes so obsessive that she intends to adopt Islam. But it is hard to believe that Vivian is influenced by the Islamic ideology, as the narrator at one place rightly says, "as with Vivian's conversion, it was more than likely that, the sole reason for her burkha was to get her mother's attention" (148). So it can be said that because of the drifting relationship between Vivian and Antonio, the daughter shifts her focus to Zia and his Islamic way of living.

The Roy—James Cambray relationship also reveals the same kind of tension between the son and the father. Roy is a friend of Zia and Amanat. Roy is seen always keeping a distance from the father. While studying at New Eden, Coonoor, Zia steals the girlfriend of Roy. But to Zia's surprise, Roy doesn't react and the episode doesn't affect their friendship. Roy's mysterious behavior is disclosed much later when he explains it to Zia through a letter: "I was looking desperately for a way to distance myself from Sarah Roberts [Roy's girlfriend]. I was terrified that she would discover what my father's business was and detest me." Father's guilt haunts Roy that forces him to remain a bachelor. In the same letter, he tells Zia, "I don't want to bring children into a world where my father has been responsible, indirectly, for the death of thousands of people" (495).

Thus, by depicting two different times and different socio-political spaces Kiran Nagarkar brings out the crucial dialectic of human relationships at the familial level and highlights the paradox of human existence where man wishes to be bound with the ties of relations and at the same level seeks freedom. It is perhaps the unity in duality that determines the very existence of human nature and his identity. Nagarkar highlights this nature of paradox that underlies the human world of relationships.

To conclude, it can be said that there is a paradigmatic shift in Kiran Nagarkar's perception of family. In his earlier novels, including *Cuckold* it is seen that although the family institution is disintegrating, almost every character is striving to preserve it. The Greeneyes is seen as a dutiful wife who not only looks after her domestic chores but also struggles to protect the honour and self-respect. In contrast to her, Shagufta appears very submissive in nature. She just escapes from her struggle. Similarly, the Maharaj Kumar fights on all fronts despite knowing that he is surrounded by enemies on familial as well as social level, but he never quits, rather he goes on finding a meaning of life by trying to establish harmony and cosy relationship with his wife. This does not happen in case of Zafar. He is never seen trying to control the colliding familial world. On contrary, he goes on accepting his personal defeat and the ultimate family disintegration. It appears that the writer perceives the impossibility of the retrieval of familial bonds in the post-global and late-capitalistic world.

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